Human Dignity  
Affirmative Case by Naomi Mathew



Who enjoys being treated unfairly? Anyone? I’m guessing that very few people would answer yes to that question. Most of us want to be treated with respect and dignity. The “common denominator” of human dignity is something that unites all people, regardless of country, economy, or social status. This affirmative case capitalizes on our desire to be treated well and uses the value of human dignity to establish common ground. It’s based on the central idea of protecting human dignity by treating the people we trade with as “ends, not means,” (to paraphrase Kant). Through two simple contentions, this case illustrates how free trade views humans simply as ways to increase profits, but fair trade takes steps to protect workers.

The resolutional analysis emphasizing “when in conflict,” serves two purposes: First, it makes you appear reasonable to the judge. You understand we aren’t presented with an all-or-nothing scenario, and the judge can appreciate this mature, nuanced view of the resolution. Second, you don’t need to argue over the effectiveness of free trade. When negatives bring up statistics about how great free trade is, you can concede that free trade does promote economic growth. However, the real debate is whether this economic growth should happen without **any** limits on how we treat producers in other countries.

The two main applications of this case are child labor in the cocoa industry and the sweatshops caused by the cheap clothing market. Each illustrates what happens when we allow unrestrained trade to promote profits over human dignity. Continue to bring these illustrations up throughout the debate – don’t let them get stuck in the first speech!

The definitions shouldn’t be an issue (but then again, this is LD!). Even if the Negative presents slightly different definitions, you should be fine. Just get the Negative to agree that free trade is essentially unrestrained trade between countries. If you can do this, you’ll be equipped to defend fair trade and human dignity.

Human Dignity

“All men are created equal.” These words from the Declaration of Independence are as true today as they were when they were first written. And because all human beings are worthy of respect and dignity, government’s trade policies should reflect this truth. This is why I stand **Resolved: When in conflict, governments should value fair trade above free trade**.

# Definitions

For clarity’s sake, let’s define some key terms:

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines **Fair Trade** as:

“a movement whose goal is to help producers in developing countries to get a fair price for their products so as to reduce poverty, provide for the ethical treatment of workers and farmers, and promote environmentally sustainable practices.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The same source defines **Free Trade** as:

“trade based on the unrestricted international exchange of goods with tariffs used only as a source of revenue.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

To paraphrase both definitions: Fair trade is trade that takes into consideration the needs of those at the other end of the transaction. On the other hand, free trade is trade with no such limits.

# Resolutional Analysis

Another concept we need to understand is the idea of “**when in conflict.”** Thankfully, we’re not asked to choose between a world with only fair trade or only free trade. In fact, much of the time these two ideas can work together. Instead we’re asked to examine fair vs free trade in conflict scenarios. So, in a scenario where unrestrained trade must come at the expense of fair prices, ethical treatment of workers, and environmental sustainability, what is more important? We can decide this with the help of:

# The Value

The value, or standard, for this round should be protecting **Human Dignity**. This is defined by the Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity as:

“Human dignity is the recognition that human beings possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let’s look at why human dignity should be our standard.

## Value Link: Universal Value

All humans, regardless of the country or government we live under, have inherent worth. Human dignity connects us all. As Donna Hicks Ph.D., who has written extensively on the concept of dignity notes:

“Everyone recognizes that we all have a deep, human desire to be treated as something of value. I believe that it is our highest common denominator. This shared desire for dignity transcends all of our differences, putting our common human identity above all else.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

A simple way to respect others is to follow the golden rule: treat others how you want to be treated. But let’s go a little bit deeper. We can know whether human dignity is being protected through the following criterion.

## Criterion: Treating people as ends, not means

Discussing how we should treat others, German philosopher Immanuel Kant gave the following principle:

“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” [[5]](#footnote-5)

What does this mean? It means that when interacting with others, we shouldn’t use them only as a tool to get what we want (aka a “means to an end”). Instead, we need to treat people as valuable regardless of what we get out of them. This leads us to our first point:

# Contention 1: Free Trade Promotes Profit Over Dignity

Free trade is useful. It connects us to other countries and promotes economic growth. But the root issue with unrestricted free trade is that it treats people as merely “means” to make a profit, instead of treating them as “ends.” The way we treat those we trade with is only an afterthought. This philosophy of ‘profit above all else’ has devastating consequences.

Unrestricted free trade promotes profitable but unethical practices such as child labor. For example, to support its 100-billion-dollar chocolate industry, Nestle relies on cocoa from West Africa. This is where an estimated 2.1 million children are put to work harvesting cocoa with machetes and hauling 100-pound bags of cocoa beans. Investigative journalists have even found cases of children being abused and trafficked into this industry against their will.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Free trade encourages the production of goods at the lowest price possible. This benefits us, the consumers, but it forces companies to cut corners on worker’s rights. Let’s examine Bangladesh, home to many sweatshops that produce cheap clothing for the world. This cheap clothing comes at a high price. For example, a poorly designed sweatshop led to a fire that killed over a hundred workers in 2012.[[7]](#footnote-7) The next year an eight-story building collapse killed over a thousand people after workers were told to continue working despite the cracks in the building walls and an evacuation the day before.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Even on normal days, the conditions in sweatshops are brutal. Hasan Ashraf, a Bangladeshi anthropologist, studied one factory for six months. He found that the dust, smoke, noise, lack of ventilation, and dangerous chemicals in the sweatshops meant workers risk their health daily,[[9]](#footnote-9) all for 65 dollars a month.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Child labor and deplorable working conditions are just a few ways free trade treats workers as means, not ends. When it conflicts with fairness, free trade degrades dignity and places profits above people. Thankfully, there is a better way.

# Contention 2: Fair Trade Prioritizes Dignity

By ensuring fair prices, ethical treatment of workers, and safe working conditions, fair trade protects human dignity. Instead of viewing trade partners solely as ways to make money, fair trade sees them as human beings who deserve basic protections. Essentially, fair trade treats people as ends instead of means.

There are many ways governments can value fair trade. Government officials can push companies to work towards more ethical practices. This is the case with Nestle, which has been pressured to drastically reduce child labor by 2020.[[11]](#footnote-11) Governments can sanction countries that deny their workers basic rights. Additionally, they can include labor and human rights standards in their free trade agreements with other countries. According to the International Labor Organization, many countries have started doing this already.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Free trade is important, but unrestrained free trade treats people as nothing more than money-making machines. Fair trade must be prioritized to ensure that human dignity is upheld. As the world-famous philosopher Dr. Seuss wrote:

“I know, up on top you are seeing great sights, but down here at the bottom we, too, should have rights.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

All people have the right to be treated with dignity, and fair trade can help make this happen. Place people above profits, affirm that “all men are created equal,” and prioritize fair trade.

Opposing This Case

# Resolutional Analysis

The Affirmative says they only needs to prove that fair trade is more important in conflict situations. First of all, demand a definitive bright line to establish when unrestricted trade “conflicts” and becomes unfair. Is a being paid 25 cents an hour a violation of human dignity? What about 5 dollars? 10 dollars? The Affirmative wants the best of both worlds – don’t let them have it.

# Value

The entire case is built on the idea of human dignity – if you can take down the value, the rest of the case can be easily taken down.

Remember that the actor in this resolution is the government. While a government should respect human rights, is a government’s purpose really to protect the human dignity of everyone worldwide? It’s not unreasonable for a government to go against Kant’s definition of dignity to promote a larger goal such as prosperity. In fact, much of politics consists of using people as means to some political end. Protecting everyone’s human dignity at any cost is totally impractical for governments.

# Contentions

In response to the idea that free trade puts profit above people, point out that free trade isn’t a zero-sum game. Trades would not be happening in the first place if both parties did not actually benefit. By our Western standards the affirmative examples sound horrifying! But remember that the US looked very similar to this nearly a century ago. These issues can be fixed given time and technological advancement.

Next, the affirmative position sounds compelling on paper, but it doesn’t hold up in the real world. We can’t hold developing nations to the labor standards of incredibly rich first-world countries. Additionally, sanctioning poor countries will be counterproductive because it denies them the opportunity to grow by trading with their more-developed counterparts. In fact, the most productive way to help workers would be to eliminate existing trade restrictions (for details check out this Brookings Institute article).[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. Merriam-Webster, “fair-trade” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fair-trade> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Merriam-Webster, “free trade” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/free%20trade> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Center for Bioethics & Human Dignity “Human Dignity” <https://cbhd.org/category/issues/human-dignity> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Donna Hicks. (Donna Hicks, Ph.D., is the author of Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict and an Associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University.) Psychology Today, April 10 2013. “What Is the Real Meaning of Dignity?” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/dignity/201304/what-is-the-real-meaning-dignity-0> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Susan Shell. The President's Council on Bioethics, March 2008. “Chapter 13: Kant's Concept of Human Dignity as a Resource for Bioethics” [https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/reports/human\_dignity/chapter13.html#](https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcbe/reports/human_dignity/chapter13.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brian O'Keefe. Fortune, March 1, 2016. “Inside Big Chocolate’s Child Labor Problem” <http://fortune.com/big-chocolate-child-labor/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jason Burke and Saad Hammadi. The Guardian, November 25, 2012. “Bangladesh textile factory fire leaves more than 100 dead” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/25/bangladesh-textile-factory-fire> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. BBC, May 10, 2013. “Bangladesh factory collapse toll passes 1,000.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22476774> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rebecca Prentice and Geert De Neve. The Conversation, November 23, 2017. “Five years after deadly factory fire, Bangladesh’s garment workers are still vulnerable” <https://theconversation.com/five-years-after-deadly-factory-fire-bangladeshs-garment-workers-are-still-vulnerable-88027> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bdnews24 (Bangladesh’s online newspaper), January 14, 2018. “Bangladesh moves to revise minimum wage for garment workers“ <https://bdnews24.com/business/2018/01/14/bangladesh-moves-to-revise-minimum-wage-for-garment-workers> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brian O'Keefe. Fortune, March 1, 2016. “Inside Big Chocolate’s Child Labor Problem” <http://fortune.com/big-chocolate-child-labor/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The International Labor Organization. “Free Trade Agreements and Labour Rights” <http://www.ilo.org/global/standards/information-resources-and-publications/free-trade-agreements-and-labour-rights/lang--en/index.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Dr. Seuss. Goodreads. “Dr. Seuss > Quotes > Quotable Quote” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/113794-i-know-up-on-top-you-are-seeing-great-sights> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Gary Burtless. The Brookings Institution, September 1, 2001. “Workers’ Rights: Labor standards and global trade.” <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/workers-rights-labor-standards-and-global-trade/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)